World Chronicle

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REFUGEES IN AFRICA

Half of the world's 14 million refugees are in Africa. Civil wars and inter-ethnic and religious violence prompt refugee flows. But the plight of refugees does not end once wars are over. The reintegration of a society destroyed by war is a long and fragile process. With so many serious crisis looming in the horizon in Africa, is the United Nations system ready to deal with an ever-increasing number of displaced persons and refugees? In this edition of **World Chronicle,** Kofi Asomani, Director of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in New York, discusses what can be done to help refugees and returnees in Africa.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. There are well over seven million refugees in Africa and the numbers are growing fast. As usual, the least protected groups, like the elderly, women and children, endure the greatest suffering. The result is a real life nightmare, one that will have consequences for decades, if not generations to come. UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, looks after refugees who are forced to flee their homes because of violence and persecution. It also helps those returning to areas devastated by war and facing dim prospects rebuilding their lives.

Our guest today is Kofi Asomani, Director of the UNHCR Office in New York. Joining me to talk with Mr. Asomani is Anne Penketh of *Agence France-Presse/AFP* and Jerome Hulé of *News Agency of Nigeria*.

Mr. Asomani, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Mr. Asomani, the number that we just mentioned -- nearly seven million refugees -- is horrifying. Where are the major problems in Africa? Which countries have the largest numbers of these refugees?

ASOMANI: They are quite spread over much of the Continent. West Africa is an area of great interest to us at this time ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Sierra Leone and ....

ASOMANI: Refugees from Sierra Leone and some from Liberia -- although they are going back from Sierra Leone -- mostly in Guinea, in Liberia, in Cote d'Ivoire and some of the other neighbouring countries. Then we have the situation in Central Africa where there is sort of refugees from different countries, all over. I believe the largest numbers would be refugees from Burundi who are in Tanzania but then there are smaller numbers of Rwandans just about in every country in Central Africa.

LITTLEJOHNS: Now how does UNHCR cope with this enormous problem? What are you doing for the refugees? Do you have them in camps? Do you provide --

other than rations – do you provide schooling for the kids? How do you operate?

ASOMANI: UNHCR's primary function is in its protection. Our main duty is to, first and foremost, provide protection for these people and this means that we must ensure that wherever they are, they are not in danger in terms of their life, their security. This is often not a very easy task and it is an aspect of UNHCR's work which is not always very well-known.

LITTLEJOHNS: So do you have a police and/or military component?

ASOMANI: Well, no, but we have arrangements with governments and governments are expected to respect certain international obligations. They've signed conventions, treaties and so on, relating to refugees and we expect that they would provide the protection for these refugees and we ensure that certain standards are met.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you are often dealing with insurgent groups that don't give a damn about treaties because they never signed treaties. They are protesting, rebelling against the legitimate government. How do you cope with people like that?

ASOMANI: Well, you know, that is one of the major problems that the Office is facing at this time. The fact is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to provide protection and security for people who are not part of the covenant groups because not every refugee has a political or military activity and, in fact, the Convention provides that if somebody is a refugee and does not in comport themselves in a certain way, they could be excluded from .....

LITTLEJOHNS: The Convention is what?

ASOMANI: It is the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees which is like the basis of – like a bible I should say.

LITTLEJOHNS: It's your charter?

ASOMANI: That's our charter.

PENKETH: What do you say then to people who say that UNHCR and other agencies are actually part of the problem in conflicts where you have these camps, for example in Eastern former Zaire, in Democratic Republic of Congo where there was a problem a couple of years ago of the former Rwandan Government forces in the refugee

camps. They were not bona fide refugees and they were re-arming.

ASOMANI: Well, that was one of the most difficult situations, I think, the Office of the High Commissioner has faced and we did everything at the time to seek international assistance to help separate the combatants, who were a minority in the group, from the larger refugee population and we were very unsuccessful. We tried all kinds of mechanisms, in fact got to a point where we had to, as it were, support members of the presidential guard to provide some form of security in the camp and that arrangement broke down, of course, as the government, the structure itself, began to collapse. So we've tried to do that. The High Commissioner asked other governments to provide security and forces to help ensure securing the camps and not a single government came forward with an offer.

PENKETH: So at this time there is no prospect of this ending and other cases and other countries around the continent?

ASOMANI: Well this is one of the problems that the Secretary-General himself has outlined in his report on Africa last year and there are a number of mechanisms that are being formulated. We are working with the Department of Peacekeeping in the UN, and with other partners, to see what kinds of arrangements can be put into place, which certainly some of which may be stand-by arrangements, or arrangements with certain governments.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean standby forces to ....

ASOMANI: Well, yes, agreements with governments who could provide eventually standby forces to deal with this. That would be one extreme but, perhaps, some simpler forms of intervention can also be thought about such as training local security forces so that they can actually enforce the security and providing them with equipment. We have done that for instance in Tanzania – providing government security and offices with equipment so that they can function better and show that there is a certain level of security in the refugee camps or in refugee areas.

PENKETH: But this seems to be accenting the fact that refugee camps have almost become a way of life. They become something permanent rather than something

temporary which was their original intention. You know when you look at the schooling that is available, the health, so you get people going in and out of the camps and often they prefer to keep the camp as a base rather than to return to their homes.

ASOMANI: Camps are really in some ways, in many situations, a last resort. Many refugees do not go into camps, they move into the areas adjacent to their home country and if it is possible for them, they would live with the communities and the hosts in the regions. And in many situations we encourage this kind of resettlement if they are welcome, if they can be protected, because that is a very important primary function, as I was mentioning earlier, and if they can sort of lead a normal sort of life. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. There can be security problem, host governments may want to have a better control of them and this is where refugee camps tend to emerge. They may want to have them in a particular locality, so that they can provide them with specific kinds of attention, medical health, facilities, and so on and in some ways, you separate them from the local population. This is not necessarily the favourite solution, but sometimes we have to resort to these kinds of solutions. So, yes, camps do exist but they are not our preferred solution in all circumstances.

HULÉ: Generally how welcome are African governments and communities to refugees considering that the number has continued to increase over the years?

ASOMANI: Well, we have an on-going dialogue with governments. We are constantly studying situations to plan emergencies – to plan for emergencies – and also to try and in some situations, to the extent possible, help avoid the kinds of tensions that could lead to conflicts and eventually to refugee flows. That's our primary role. There are other organs in the UN, there are other departments who are very much involved with that and we work very closely with them. Our primary role, as I said, is to protect refugees once the flows do occur and to provide material assistance for them and we advise governments on how to do this and also help to mobilize financial support to actually get the governments and others – non-governmental organizations and others – to actually attend to the needs of the refugees.

HULÉ: I'll take you to Angola where you find because of the fighting, it's

difficult to have access to displaced persons. What is the situation there now?

ASOMANI: The situation in Angola is a very distressing one. We have gone from a situation only a few years back when we felt that Angola was on its way to some kind of stability and that the UN and other international kinds of incorporation could lead to resuming and reviving the economy and other things. Unfortunately, this trend has not been borne out and rather, we're seeing more and more the rebirth of tension and even fighting. What do we do in situations like that? We are working with the government but also there is a sense that in order to have access to some parts of the country, where the government is not totally in control we may have to establish certain rules of engagement with others in order to have access to people who are in need. Of course, in Angola, we don't have large numbers of refugees as such. We do have large numbers of returnees – Angolans who had fled the country and who have been assisted to return to Angola and of course we have a certain concern for their security until they are totally sort of reintegrated or rehabilitated in their country of origin.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Kofi Asomani, Director of the UNHCR Office in New York.

PENKETH: Your people are actually in danger, though, in some of these conflict situations. Where do you draw the line ? We've already seen in Angola, I think, the World Food Programme person killed. How can you carry on in such circumstances?

ASOMANI: The problem of the security of humanitarian workers is one of the other big problems that we are having to deal with. It's not just with UNHCR but the whole UN humanitarian community and this is why establishing some rules of engagement with whoever is in control, whether it is the government or some other force, is always very important because as somebody said around this table, the government is not always in control and we have to acknowledge that. But we don't take sides if we want to have access to the victims and so whatever arrangements we can make in order to have access are very important. Now that is perhaps the most powerful line of protection that the humanitarian workers have that people who are in control, whether they're government and others, do respect the safety of humanitarian workers and that they actually work

actively to ensure that this is possible short of say bringing in an external force to protect the, but we know that this is not always been a very viable or even very popular mechanism. So how do we provide assistance in Angola? We are working on establishing these arrangements so that we can have access to the regions where the victims are so they can be assisted.

HULÉ: I have a feeling that there have been some refugees who stayed in the country for over ten years or more, how is life like? How do they live their daily life and how does the person who has been displaced from his own immediate community to integrate after the condition is for him to go back home?

ASOMANI: It's something that we're seeing perhaps less and less in Africa today a little bit because there is a lot of pressure, once large groups of populations move into host communities, there's a lot of pressure for them to go back. But yes, we have in the past, say with Sierra Leone – Sierra Leonean refugees have been in Guinea, some of them for more than ten years – and we have seen Liberian refugees in other countries in West Africa also over long periods. How do they live? They are assisted by the international community, by UNHCR and other agencies – the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and others – to rebuild a life in the host country. In some cases some of them become quite integrated to the extent that they have new families in the host country and they are ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Children go to school?

ASOMANI: Children go to school in some situations, and this is part of many refugee programmes.

HULÉ: They have employment?

ASOMANI: In some cases they do have employment or opportunities are provided for them to create employment opportunities especially if they are people who have a background in say, farming. Of course, it is much harder when you move out of sort of these large scale kinds of solutions and you're looking at individual solutions. Some of them are the most difficult because it is very hard to tailor a solution for each and every family. But even there, there are attempts either through training, re-training, getting

people to be oriented towards the markets in the country in which they are ...

LITTLEJOHNS: So you're saying that the lives of not all refugees are not that terrible? I mean they're managing reasonably well in many cases?

ASOMANI: In some cases – in some cases I would say. But I would say that the vast majority live lives- which are very precarious. They're precarious because the kinds of assistance, the levels of assistance which are provided, are minimal. They are, in many cases, just above the life sustaining sort of levels. In many cases the host communities, the people amongst whom they are living, are people who are themselves very much deprived populations. Most refugees end up in the poorest parts of the countries where they go to seek refuge. They end up in the border areas which are very far away from the metropolitan and sort of in the centres of power as it were and power and affluence in the host country.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Asomani as this programme is being televised, there is yet another conflict in Africa namely between Ethiopia and Erithrea. What is UNHCR doing to cope with the inevitable refugee influx from that conflict?

ASOMANI: We are obviously – UNHCR is obviously – very distressed also by the prospect of a conflict and there is already a great deal of tension between the two countries. For the moment, we have not played a great role, a major role, because it is one in which there has been a kind of an exchange of populations who have been forced out -- they have not willingly left. The Eritreans have not willingly left Ethiopia to go back home and vice-versa until this has been handled by other new departments in the UN. But obviously there is a conflict, there is a war and there are large numbers of either Ethiopians or Erithreans moving out of their home country. And perhaps UNHCR and other agencies will be called upon to actually take effective action.

PENKETH: But is there a danger at this stage now in the light of this latest conflict which means that we now have fighting all the way through Africa, this whole swath from the Horn of Africa through the centre and down to Angola and the Southwest, isn't there a danger that the UNHCR could be overstretched? How has it changed in the 20 years that you have been with the Agency?

ASOMANI: Well, it's changed very much. We've always had large numbers of refugees in Africa and in the late 70s and early 80s we were dealing with the aftermath of colonialism and many of the refugees who we were dealing with, were refugees who had become refugees as a result of either the colonial sort of wars of liberation and so on or related wars. We saw this in Southern Africa most of the time, for the most part in Southern Africa, and then you didn't have the plethora of little wars or internal conflicts that we are seeing now. There were wars between countries, there's wars of liberation in Angola and Mozambique, and so on. What we are seeing now are lots of internal conflicts all over the Continent and this is very worrying. These are harder to deal with. They are not orderly, if one can use the word, conflicts. There are lots of problems and each one has its own specific characteristic and one finds it very difficult to see what kind of grand design as it were one can be put together in order to come forward with a comprehensive solution. And this is of course not in the domain of UNHCR – it's more of the political departments.

PENKETH: But you are dousing the fires, aren't you?

ASOMANI: Yes, sort of.

PENKETH: Are you overstretched? Are your resources overstretched?

ASOMANI: Our resources, I believe, are far overstretched, very well overstretched. We are getting to have to deal with more and more refugees, more and more situations and with much less resources.

LITTLEJOHNS: Where does most of your funding come from? The United States?

ASOMANI: The United States does provide a very substantial amount but ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Cash and a truck of food or something like that, I suppose.

ASOMANI: Mostly cash. Food assistance, we have arrangements with the World Food Programme which provides many of the food requirements of refugees. It's kind of reached a point where we have established some kind of predictable cooperative arrangement with some of our sister agencies – WFP, UNICEF, and some of the others. The United States, yes, is a principal donor, the European Union is another very important

donor and Japan and some countries, like Japan, other important. I would say that those would be like the three main donors and some of the Nordic countries are also very, very ...

HULÉ: Have you had a situation whereby you cannot provide for refugees because you run out of your budget?

ASOMANI: We always try to find a way of providing minimum ... minimal assistance. There are lots of refugee situations which are not the most popular ones -- for instance the Sierra Leonean, the refugee situation, was for many years not the most popular. Refugees in Guinea have, in fact over the years, received the bare minimum. This is because, perhaps, they were not strategically important. There were other reasons why we did not receive as much funding for them and in those kinds of situations, we have to dig into, what we call, our regular budget.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Asomani, that's all the time we have. We're out of our budget. Thanks for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Kofi Asomani, Director of the UNHCR Office in New York. He was interviewed by Anne Penketh of *Agence-France Press/AFP* and Jerome Hulé of *News Agency of Nigeria*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**